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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5027
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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR PRM F/O, NEA/ELA, NEA/I

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SUBJECT: DAMASCUS REFUGEE SITREP 4
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¶1. (SBU) This is the forth in a series of Embassy Damascus's updates on refugee processing in Syria

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: UNHCR reports rising concern among the resident Iraqi community about their ability to extend their visas once Syrian schools let out in June but we have no evidence SARG has changed its policy on allowing refugees to stay in Syria. Post is taking steps to improve the medical clearance process for refugees. The departing DHS Circuit Riders processed 598 cases, recommending 504(1514 individuals) for ressetlement. A second team arrived on May 22 and expects to complete 580 - 600 case before departing July 9, the day their Syrian visas expire. Post also hosted a thank-you BBQ for some 150 staffers from various organizations involved with Iraqi refugees. END SUMMARY

¶3. (SBU) IRAQI REFUGEE VISAS: UNHCR reported that many Iraqis are concerned that they may be forced to return to Iraq once the school year is complete. In October 2007 the SARG imposed a visa regime allowing only certain Iraqis (those with medical conditions, business, etc.) to enter. In the past, refugees with children in school had to provide justification, such as school enrollment papers, to renew their visas. As the end of the school year approaches, rumors have been spreading around Damascus that the SARG will not renew these visas - as these Iraqi students are not technically in school, Iraqis will not have justification for a renewal. UNHCR Representative Lorens Jolles reported that he spoke with the MFA and was assured that there "will not be a forced deportation of Iraqi refugees." Additionally, according to UNHCR, recent reports from refugees suggest that the border guards are now determining length of stay based upon the content of medical records, making it increasingly difficult to obtain an entry visa on medical grounds. Iraqis facing a risk of deportation are those who have been arrested or detained, destroyed their documents, entered Syria illegally, or committed any type of criminal act including petty crimes.

¶4. (SBU) IOM/PANEL PHYSICIAN OUTREACH: Post initiated monthly meetings with IOM and panel physicians to improve the medical clearance process and maximize the number processed each month. The meetings are a mechanism for IOM to share its caseload projections with the physicians so more medical are done in less time. Our first such meeting is scheduled for June 1.

¶5. (SBU) CIRCUIT RIDE TRANSITION: The new DHS/USCIS circuit ride team arrived Damascus on May 21-22. Five of the incoming seven person team are Damascus Circuit Rider veterans, including the team leader. This team has a full time finger printer and will interview 20 or 21 cases a day through July 9. The outgoing six-person team departed

Damascus on May 23.

¶6. (SBU) DHS OUTBRIEF: Marcela Moglia, the departing DHS
Circuit Ride team leader, reported that during her Circuit
Ride, her team interviewed 598 cases(1703 individuals) and
recommended 504 cases (1514 individuals) for rersettlement in
the U.S. Moglia thanked the IOM support team at UNHCR for its
"high quality, consistent support." Moglia also thanked IOM
for its flexibility with scheduling and its support during
the change of work schedule. Moglia was pleased with the
plexiglas improvements in the interview booths and thanked
everyone involved: UNHCR, IOM, Post's GSO and PRM.

¶7. (SBU) THANK YOU FOR REFUGEE ORGANIZATIONS: To thank
international and domestic assistance groups, the Charge
hosted approximately 150 people from UNHCR, IOM, DHS and
other refugee NGOs for a BBQ at the Ambassador's residence on
May 17. The event went well and was appreciated by all.
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